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PERSONAL SKETCHES.

No. VI.

JOSEPH HUME, ESQ. M.P.

Were we asked to describe in brief terms the character of the present age, we should pronounce it to be *maximus in minimis*. We say this, not in forgetfulness of the United Kingdom steam-ship, or the Liverpool and Manchester rail-road, or the Menai bridge, or any other of the stupendous works which astound the imagination by their splendour, magnitude, and ability. These vast things are but the aggregation of minute contrivance, and can no more be adduced as evidence of individual greatness, than the islands of the South Seas could be of the greatness of the coral-worms, from whose minute and multitudinous labours they arise. We lack men whose minds are in themselves a world—who stamp the time with their own image, and who should be the beacons to mark our æra, when, in ages yet unborn, men shall look back along the ocean of time, and fix their eye upon the reign of George the Fourth. “The aggregate of ability in the House of Commons,” as we heard a very *clever* member of that assembly say, not long ago, “is as great as it ever was. We cannot shew any very great, or shining genius, but we can produce more men of ‘average talent’ than former Houses of Commons, which boasted of more eminent leaders.”

Average talent indeed! yes, there are plenty who would make very good churchwardens, or auditors of accounts, or common-councilmen, or crafty, ingenious lawyers, like Sir James Scarlett—but still, the character of our parliament has fallen. If it were not so, the subject of this sketch could never have attained the kind of fame—half ridiculous, half serious, which is associated with his name.

Before I had seen Mr. Hume, and when I looked on him with the eye of my imagination, as the personification of my abstract idea of a prying, anxious, arithmetical, pains-taking Scotchman,

A sly, slow thing with circumspective eyes, I had him before me, a thin, dark-featured man, with high cheek bones, and sharp shoulders, and an awkward gait—I was not a little surprised then, when I found the veritable Joseph—the pertinacious advocate of twopenny-halfpenny reforms—the unwearied student of estimates—the eternal, teasing, stinging blister upon the neck of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, a portly, comfortable, bull-necked man, who looked as if he took his rations of beef abundantly, and had his sleep o’ nights. One often goes to the House of Commons in the hope of seeing and hearing some particular person, and has to return disappointed—but this can never happen to him whose curiosity yearns for a sight and hearing of Mr. Hume.

You are as sure of him as of the speaker’s chair, or the chandelier—much surer than of the speaker, or the lighted candles, for sometimes the house is in committee, and the speaker not to be seen, and sometimes candles are not lighted—but, committee or no committee—day-light, or candle-light—Hume is there—ever at *his post*. This I say, not as a figure, but literally, for there is a post, or slender pillar, which supports the gallery, by the side of which Mr. Hume, it would appear, has *taken his seat*, and if the cushion in that spot, has not adapted itself in shape to the fundamental feature upon which the honorable and economical member for Montrose hinges, it must be proof against a tolerably weighty and very long-continued impression. Mr. Hume is a plain, stout, eating and drinking, common-place looking person. He has rather a comely, stupid-looking face—a fat head, with close cropped hair, rather turning to grey, and altogether his air is that of a comfortable tradesman, in his Sunday clothes. In the house you commonly see him in the commencement of the evening with a bundle of parchments or papers beside him, which he calls *petitions*, very few of which he has the mercy to present without saying something in the way of commentary on what they contain, and in this, as indeed in his character generally, we shall find that the peculiarities arise principally from negatives. It is not by reason of that which is in him, but in consequence of that which is not in him, that Mr. Hume is so perpetually before us. By the multitude, he is thought to be the most impudent man that has ever appeared since the world began. When the volume of the “Percy Anecdotes” appeared, called “Anecdotes of Impudence,” a portrait of Mr. Hume was given as the frontispiece; but he has not in him any thing of that slashing, forward, ostreperous manner, which we, in Ireland, call impudence. His style of impudence answers better to Addison’s definition. The secret of his lofty qualifications in that important line seems to rest in the complete absence of any sense of insufficiency—this sense, which is, in some degree, natural to most men, at all events with regard to matters with which they are not in the least acquainted, seems either never to have existed, or to be utterly annihilated, in Mr. Hume’s machinery of mental sensation. Any question of an extensive or profound nature, the mind of Mr. Hume can no more comprehend, than his arms could embrace Mount Leinster—yet he puts forth his little mental antennæ, like the fly upon the dome of Saint Paul’s, and talks with an easy complacency of the largest subjects, in a manner which is amusing enough, until it becomes tiresome. The obscurity which must be before his eyes, whenever any thing like a broad political principle comes to be discussed, does not, in the least, deter him—on he plods, and being wholly destitute of any

perception of the ridiculous, the absurdity of his situation is not perceived by himself, nor can he understand it when suggested by others. He does not appear to have any notion of language beyond the very simplest; he knows generally, perhaps, that language consists of sounds or signs to express notions, but of the construction of sentences, of the force of one method of expression, beyond that of another, of the exactness necessary to the accurate communication of ideas, he seems to be utterly unconscious. I have listened to him for a quarter of an hour attentively, (the force of patience could no farther go,) and I could have been upon my oath, that from the beginning of the first minute to the end of the fifteenth, he did not make one finished sentence. A loose heap of thoughts, or rather glimmerings of thoughts, seemed to hang like fuzzy ill-spun threads in the chambers of his mind, and he seemed to be endeavouring to catch at all, lest some should escape, yet leaving each before he had drawn it forth sufficiently to be seen by his auditory. Nevertheless, from this strange slip-slop method of talking, it can generally be discovered what he would say, if he could say it correctly: like a short-hand writer’s notes, which but half express the words, yet enable you to guess at the whole, Mr. Hume’s continuous confused stream of discourse, gives you a knowledge of the distinct notions he is aiming at; and Messieurs, the reporters, are good enough to translate about a fiftieth part of the non-descript language which he utters, into something possessing a resemblance to grammatical propriety. There are one or two general principles in politics, which Mr. Hume appears to embrace *toto corde*; and to assert with a frequency which is amusingly provoking, when it is so palpable that his mind cannot at all comprehend the remote and extended results of the principles which he maintains. He feels no hesitation in getting up to speak upon the corn laws, as though the subject in debate were some small matter referable to that stage of arithmetical science, called “Reduction of divers denominations,” and he tells the house, “Ser, ai am for a free trade in corne, becas ai think ther shude be free trade in *ivery* thing;”—and again, “Ai say, Ser, that I shude wesh freedom of trade in *ivery* thing, becas *ivery* thing would be sure to find its owne layvel.” This matter, of every thing finding its own level, seems to be the tortoise, which supports the world of Joseph’s political principles in commercial policy; but an enquiry as to what this general level principle stands upon, as to the usefulness of every thing finding its own level, or as to the distinct practical meaning of the expression, seems never to have suggested itself to his understanding. It might, perhaps, be no unprofitable subject of meditation for him in his leisure moments, if he ever have any such, whether if every man, as well as “*ivery* thing,”

found its own level, he would continue to be a talking member of the British House of Commons.

If any other man in the world had met with such and so many rebukes and rebuffs, as Mr. Hume has met with, he would have run away from public life, and hid himself for shame; but here again our worthy friend is preserved to us by the absolute negation of any sensibility to reproof. Not only is he not "thin-skinned," as the phrase is; but there is something so dull, and tough, and leathery, in his temperament, that nothing can pierce, nothing can wound him. If Lord Palmerston after having got up five times, and explained a matter to the honorable member for Aberdeen, still finds the honorable member drawing away at the same misconception with which he began, and if the noble lord thereupon getting a little irate, rises to declare, that though every other man in the house must have understood his explanation, yet he sees it is quite hopeless to expect "to soak it into the impenetrable obscurity of the honorable member's brains," Mr. Hume very quietly utters some confused sounds, from which you perceive he means to say, that however obscure his brains may be, that is no good reason for the noble lord opposite getting into a passion, and being personally severe; and then he returns once more to the old misconception, and works on in his track as if nothing had happened.

In the same way, should Mr. Croker twit him about his arithmetic, or Sir Henry Hardinge about his naughtiness in talking of ladies, it is all received with equal coolness, and we have Mr. Hume the next day, the same attentive industrious bore, that he ever has been in the house, and ever will be, until something removes him from it, or some *consideration* more valuable than is likely to be offered to him, obscures his economical vision.

Let it, however, not be forgotten, for even the devil, they say, should not be defrauded of his due, that Mr. Hume has the merit of being very industrious; and he has ferretted out numerous abuses in the application of small sums of the public money, which no one else would have taken the trouble of searching after. The pitiful system of jobbing, and providing for younger sons and dependant relations, in public offices, whereby the said offices were filled with ignorance, puppyism, and idleness; and a thousand other petty wrongs, and meannesses, by which persons in stations that ought to have elevated them above such practices, cheated the public of small sums of money in the dark, have been checked by the vigilance of Mr. Hume, which brought on either actual exposure, or wholesome fear. He certainly has the merit of having first compelled the government to observe some exactness and some economy in small matters; and though much trouble, and much annoyance to respectable folks in middling circumstances, who were made comfortable by receiving moderate salaries for doing nothing, have resulted therefrom, yet it was well that this petty corruption should be stopped, partly for an example to higher quarters, and partly that it made the deprived cry aloud, and show where the deeper mischief lay in 'the high places.'

The 'tattle of the wholl,' then, is, that Mr. Hume is a teasing, unpleasant, useful sort of person, in a small way; but when he stands up to talk about the settlement or unsettlement of the church, of the corn laws, of the

free trade system, or indeed of any large and important subject, he is not useful, and he is ridiculous. Should any reader be so superfluous as to contrast, unfavourably, the present sketch with my preceding one of Mr. Brougham, or of the Duke, let such mal-content take to count the venerable though homely adage, which sets forth the difficulty of fabricating a silken purse, the raw material being given of a certain description which shall be nameless to ears polite.

OUTIS.

REVIEWS OF BOOKS.

Dr. Lardner's Cabinet Cyclopaedia. Lives of Eminent British Lawyers. By Henry Roscoe, Esq.—London: Longman and Co. and John Taylor.

WE are inclined to praise this book, though we should not be very proud of having written it. There are two sorts of biography, one which exhibits talent, and one which exhibits nothing save patient research—with the last we rank this production of Mr. Roscoe. He does not seem, indeed, to aspire to any fame beyond that of a mere compiler, and to that task he appears to have addressed himself with zeal and diligence. He is admirable at detailing a pedigree—quite at home in illustrating events by studious research. His details in many cases are valuable and interesting, his impartiality is laudable, but throughout his whole book, we cannot feel or acknowledge any intellectual mastery. In his volume he has brought together many pleasing attractions of variety and anecdote, calculated to rouse reflection; but there is no well sustained tone of general reasoning, to keep that from falling loosely from, or lying unconnectedly in, the mind; and we look in vain for aught of that fine spirit of philosophy, feeling, or high enthusiasm, which one might have expected the author to display in commenting on his deep and varied, and profoundly interesting theme. A good share of information is conveyed in a clear and easy style—nothing more. But, (for, as in a reviewer's praises, there is generally a *but*, so let there be in his censure,) we would not refuse that credit which the book may rightly challenge. We are far from blaming that patient labour in a biographer which is the duty of the historian—we think diligent and enthusiastic research entitled to high praise.

Sir Edward Coke justly stands first on the list, for we must consider Bacon merely as a lawyer. Sir Edward's life throughout is written with clearness, but his character much overrated. The biographer has laboured in vain to illustrate in it the progress of a powerful mind, unseduced, through a long life, from the steady course of constitutional principles. Indefatigable industry, wonderful talents, and valuable services, have imprinted the name of Coke on the annals of his country, but his judgment was too frequently warped by ambition, and he escaped not that less noble failing—impatience for promotion. These things made him practice base and courtier-like devices, these things

Like stains upon a vestal's robe,
The worse for *what* they soil—

made him, in the words of Hallam, "a flatterer, and a tool till he obtained his ends."—The life of such a man affords matter for much, though melancholy and humiliating instruction;

and his biographer might have illustrated the great lesson, that even in the eyes of the world, honesty of principle is at least as respectable as knowledge.

The memoir of Selden is meagre and unsatisfactory. We turn with more satisfaction to that of Sir Matthew Hale. If ever there lived an honest man, this was one. Independent, acute, and trustworthy, honest as well as amiable, he lived in a disturbed age—he went through the most stern and trying duties, and troubles, yet his philosophy escaped all soil and tarnish. He viewed from a distance "the maddening crowd's ignoble strife," acting as the defender and champion of all that were aggrieved or oppressed. The following extract will at this period possess considerable interest:

"At the present moment, when the amendment of the law has not only engaged the attention of the legislature, but has become a subject of no inconsiderable interest with the people at large, it will not be unprofitable to state what were the opinions of Sir Matthew Hale as to the possibility of effectuating so important an object. After some observations on the evils arising from 'over-hastiness and forwardness to alterations in the laws,' he proceeds to remark upon 'the over-tenacious holding of laws, notwithstanding apparent necessity for and safety in the change.' The principles which Hale here lays down, though most obvious and simple, are yet most admirable, and well deserve the attention of those legislators who can see nothing in our institutions requiring reform. 'We must remember that laws were not made for their own sakes, but for the sake of those who were to be guided by them; and though it is true that they are and ought to be sacred, yet if they be or are become unuseful for their end, they must either be amended, if it may be, or new laws be substituted, and the old repealed, so it be done regularly, deliberately, and so far forth only as the exigence or convenience justly demands it; and in this respect the saying is true, *Salus populi suprema lex esto.*' * * *

'He that thinks a state can be exactly steered by the same laws in every kind as it was two or three hundred years ago, may as well imagine that the clothes that fitted him when a child should serve him when he was grown a man. The matter changeth, the custom, the contracts, the commerce, the dispositions, educations, and tempers of men and societies, change in a long tract of time, and so must their laws in some measure be changed, or they will not be useful for their state and condition; and besides all this, time is the wisest thing under heaven. These very laws, which at first seemed the wisest constitution under heaven, have some flaws and defects discovered in them by time. As manufactures, mercantile arts, architecture, and building, and philosophy itself, secure new advantages and discoveries by time and experience, so much more do laws which concern the manners and customs of men.'

The multiplication and growth of the laws are urged by Hale as inducing a necessity for their revision and reduction:—By length of time and continuance, laws are so multiplied and grown to that excessive variety, that there is a necessity of a reduction of them, or otherwise it is not manageable. * * * And the reason is, because this age, for the purpose, received from the last a body of laws, and they add more, and transmit the whole to the next